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Submitted by Anonymous on February 11, 2009 - 7:00pm

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As the Kyrgyz government continues to balance intricate negotiations with both Washington and Moscow over the future of the American military base at Manas, US policymakers would do well to reflect on their recent experience in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Though it is tempting to blame the cash-strapped regime of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and a meddlesome Russia for the difficulties currently faced by the United States in Kyrgyzstan, US planners and officials made their own fair share of faulty assumptions and missteps in dealing with the Manas issue. I would like to touch on five of these:

Lesson #1: The Size of an Overseas Base Does Not Determine its Political Footprint

Manas exemplifies the new type of small-scale, regionally-oriented and flexible base that the Pentagon is currently developing as part of its global defense posture restructuring plan. Housing about 1,000-1,200 troops on a rotating basis and operated mostly by contractors, Manas was the quintessential "lily pad" envisioned by defense planners. [[For additional information click here](#) ^[2]]. Proponents of the lily-pad strategy also argued that smaller bases leave a less socially intrusive or lighter footprint, thereby avoiding political conflicts that have surrounded the larger US military facilities in places like Okinawa and Korea.

However, as the Kyrgyz case conclusively demonstrates, the small size of the base does not stop it from becoming politicized. In fact, it now stands as the central issue in US-Kyrgyz relations. The United States privileged the base and its operations over all other forms of engagement with the Kyrgyz Republic, including many of its long-standing democratization, education and media programs. Moreover, this fixation with the base actually undermined US capacity to pressure the Kyrgyz side to maintain its commitment to democratic development. For example, after Kurmanbek Bakiyev's Ak-Zhol Party won a highly flawed parliamentary election in December 2007, US officials were tepid in their criticism, fearing that Bakiyev would threaten the basing agreement. In terms of its political significance, then, Manas shows how even a small base can dominate the political calculations of an overseas host government.

Lesson #2: Tacit Quid pro Quo Generates Unintended Consequences and Demands

A second clear lesson from Manas is that US policy towards granting quid pro quo to host governments for basing rights is outdated, ineffective and even counterproductive. Since the end of the Cold War, US policymakers have stubbornly adhered to the policy that they officially do not pay rent to overseas governments for access agreements. Instead, the United States can offer military and economic assistance to its security partners, but it will never officially acknowledge that such packages are offered in exchange for basing rights.

When the base was established in 2001, US officials initially offered \$2 million a year in rent and

channeled base-related fuel and service contracts to friends and relatives of former president Askar Akayev. These were needed services for the United States, but US officials also appear to have understood that they were lining the pockets of Kyrgyz officials in order to secure their cooperation.

When in the summer of 2005 newly-elected President Kurmanbek Bakiyev demanded a hundred-fold increase in rent from \$2 million to \$200 million, US negotiators refused to pay this increased sum and, instead, agreed to provide a total annual \$150 million worth of aid to the Central Asian state. [[For background see the Eurasia Insight Archive](#) ^[3]]. But the Kyrgyz side viewed the July 2006 agreement explicitly as a base rights package, and soon after became disgruntled that a variety of unwanted aid projects were being counted as part of the quid pro quo. By relying on a series of tacit insider deals -- as opposed to paying a more substantial, but transparent rent for the facility -- US planners not only encouraged Kyrgyz graft and corruption, but opened the door to the Kyrgyz government to be tempted by Russia's counteroffer of \$300 million in cash (in addition to \$1.7 billion investment and \$180 million in debt relief) to evict the United States.

Lesson #3: Out of Sight is Not Out of Mind

A third lesson involves the visibility and interaction between the base and the local community in Bishkek and nearby towns. Kyrgyz business owners fondly recall the year 2002 when US service personnel frequented the restaurants and shops in Bishkek, along with their multinational counterparts who were also serving at Manas. A more visible and multinational presence in the capital generated both much-needed income and local goodwill towards the base and its mission.

But after a couple of incidents involving US service members driving in Bishkek, base officials restricted off base outings in an attempt to minimize social disturbances, while troops from other coalition partners left Manas. Kyrgyz businesses lost an important source of revenue and U.S. personnel lost the opportunity to interface with and learn about the Kyrgyz community.

Also, although Manas-related contractors continued to provide hundreds of jobs for Kyrgyz workers, many additional opportunities for local business and agricultural producers to service the base were denied by U.S. regulations. Most Kyrgyz looked at the occasional community outreach and charitable work done by U.S. service members cynically. Indeed, the very sequestered nature of the base made it easy for critics to point to its secrecy as itself sufficient evidence of American nefarious activities. Because the base did not sufficiently interface with the local community, most Kyrgyz citizens felt as if the benefits of the U.S. presence were selectively bestowed upon connected officials and contractors.

Lesson #4: Base-Related Incidents Should be Treated as Political Crises, not Legal Matters

An on-going challenge that confronts all US military installations abroad is how to minimize the political damage from base-related accidents, crimes and incidents. On several occasions, US officials botched the handling of the aftermath of such high-profile incidents, thereby severely damaging Washington's credibility and public perceptions about the base.

For example, on December 6, 2006, US serviceman Zachary Hatfield shot and killed, just outside of the base, Alexander Ivanov, a Russian fuel truck driver and long-time employee of a base contractor. Hatfield claimed that Ivanov had threatened him with a knife, but Kyrgyz media reports disputed his account. Details of the incident remain sketchy. Kyrgyz officials demanded that Hatfield be turned over to Kyrgyz authorities for questioning and possible prosecution, a request that was refused by US officials who claimed jurisdiction in accordance with the 2001 Status of Forces Agreement. Though they initially agreed to keep Hatfield at Manas for the duration of a Kyrgyz-led investigation, they subsequently removed him from the country and have yet to try or discipline him.

As with other now infamous accidents involving US overseas bases (Okinawa 1995, Korea 2002), American officials managed the aftermath of the incident poorly because they viewed it primarily as matter of legal jurisdiction, and not a political crisis that required urgent attention and active media management. In retrospect a clear statement of apology and joint visit by the base commander and US Ambassador to Ivanov's widow would have gone a long way towards softening the US image and taking the sting out of Kyrgyz media accusations that the American government was inherently reckless and uncaring. Further, the frequent rotation of US base personnel prevented commanders and public affairs officials from building an institutional memory that fully appreciated the cumulative toll that these incidents took on Kyrgyz perceptions.

Lesson #5: A Good Public Affairs Strategy Must be Responsive and Visible

A final lesson is that the US public relations effort surrounding the base should have been stronger. Given the small size of the troop presence, the PR office at Manas was minimal and lacked experienced PAOs who had dealt with challenging media environments in other overseas settings. All too often, base officials remained silent on Manas-related issues and the US viewpoint was not vigorously presented in the Kyrgyz media. Public Affairs reacted defensively to stories and rumors, rather than try to actively shape perceptions and frame the message.

As it turns out, not drawing attention to the base was not a prudent strategy, given that many Russian-language media outlets and websites regularly ran stories and even published false rumors about the base, its activities and personnel. According to Kyrgyz news agencies, Internet stories about the base consistently received the most views. However, the US Embassy in Bishkek, unlike US embassies in other overseas hosts (such as Romania), did not even post on its website a basic FAQ that explained the base's purpose and activities. Overall, the US perspective about Manas and its operations was not adequately presented to the Kyrgyz public.

Conclusions: The Five Lessons of Manas

Manas may seem like an isolated and unique case, but it should serve as a reminder for US policymakers that it is vitally important to have an overall strategy to deal with the political, economic and public relations impact of its overseas bases. As US planners explore possible alternative basing arrangements with other countries, they would do well to avoid some of the missteps that have undermined support for the US presence in Kyrgyzstan.

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